



Dec. 23, 2018 Luke 1: 39-55 & Micah 5: 1-4

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[New Melleray Monastery Sunday Homilies](#)

ENTERING THE SCENE:

In this last Sunday of Advent we encounter two women whose lives are radically changed by new life. One, an old woman freed from the shame and angst of barrenness, the other very young and unmarried: each woman helping the other to make sense of their experience. Each entering into whatever God had in store for them. The two unborn babies both promised by angels will go on to become the fulfillment of ancient promises. Elizabeth and Mary set examples for all of us who once again plunge deeper into the mystery of the Incarnation.

Luke 1:39—55

39 At that time **Mary got ready and hurried** to a town in the **hill country** of Judea, 40 where she entered **Zechariah's** home and greeted **Elizabeth**. 41 When **Elizabeth** heard **Mary's** greeting, the baby **leaped** in her womb, and **Elizabeth** was **filled** with the **Holy Spirit**. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "**Blessed** are you among **women**, and **blessed** is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my **Lord** should come to me? 44 As

soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb **leaped** for joy. 45 **Blessed** is she who has **believed** that what the **Lord** has said to her will be accomplished!"

(Revised Common Lectionary adds these verses)

46 And **Mary** said: "My soul glorifies the **Lord** 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has been **mindful** of the **humble** state of his **servant**. From now on all **generations** will call me **blessed**, 49 for the **Mighty One** has done **great things** for me-- holy is his name. 50 His **mercy** extends to those who fear him, from **generation** to **generation**. 51 He has performed **mighty deeds** with his arm; he has scattered those who are **proud** in their inmost thoughts. 52 He has brought down **rulers** from their thrones but has lifted up the **humble**. 53 He has **filled** the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away **empty**. 54 He has **helped** his servant Israel, remembering to be **merciful** 55 to **Abraham** and his descendants forever, even as he said to our **fathers**"

DISCUSSION QUESTION: In the Incarnation we too can proclaim that "the Mighty One has done great things for me –holy is his name". How do I live this proclamation?

PRAYER: Blessed women, your lived experience of welcoming angels and saying yes to God in your own special way, challenge me to reflect on how I too welcome angels and say yes to God. You most certainly were ready when your invitations came. I have attempted to deepen my readiness this Advent. Help me to trust that I too will be blessed because of my readiness. Amen.

WORD STUDY AND QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTIONS:

MARY: When God chose to enter into human history in a personal way, God chose Mary, a very young woman from the tiny town of Nazareth.

If the Incarnation were to happen today, where do I think that God would go to find someone willing to say yes? Could I say yes?

GOT READY / HURRIED: Mary lost no time in checking out the truth of what the angel said to her.

When I am are invited by God to go beyond the 'reasonable', do I respond quickly, or do I delay?

HILL COUNTRY: In a time when women did not venture out alone anywhere, anytime, Mary travels a four day journey to get to Elizabeth and Zechariah's home.

What does this tell me about Mary's frame of mind? What is Luke telling me by giving me these details?

ZECHARIAH / ELIZABETH: Zechariah and Elizabeth are living with their own mystery in this late conception. Yet, they are within the biblical tradition of God doing such marvelous things. (Gn. 18:11; Judges 13: 2-5; 1 Sam. 1:5f)
Would this make it easier to understand for Zechariah and Elizabeth? How would Mary's situation differ, and what new questions about God are evoked by this unusual conception?

LEAPED: Mother and child are intimately connected during pregnancy. The developing children felt the high state of excitement of their two mothers. Luke interprets this to mean something divine was happening.
With what we now know about fetal development, does this interpretation hinder, or enhance my understanding?

FILLED: Both women are overflowing with joy and wonder at what is happening in and through them.
How has this Advent filled me with joy and wonder, so as to participate in the mystery of the Incarnation in a deeper way?

HOLY SPIRIT: these women experience the Spirit of God, who makes all things whole, as they encounter their respective wonders.
What wonders have I encountered in my faith life this past year that have given me a sense of wholeness/holiness?

BLESSED: Once again we encounter the familiar formula (Judges 5:24; Judith 13:18 etc.) that proclaims that all blessings are gifts of God.
How has this Advent preparation deepened my consciousness of God blessing me?

WOMEN: In Jesus' day, women were certainly among the 'least' of humanity. Luke's gospel emphasizes the 'least' of the earth as being those God reaches most easily.
What is it about being one of the 'least' that makes this possible?

LORD: The word Lord in Jesus' day meant someone who was in charge of people or property.
What is Elizabeth saying to Mary when she uses the word Lord?

BELIEVED: To believe is to accept something as true.
What is Elizabeth saying to Mary here?

MINDFUL: To be mindful, is to keep someone or something in mind.
What is God keeping in mind here?

HUMBLE / PROUD: Luke searches the scriptures for understanding this very unusual event. He has Mary singing a song that gives us the clues to this mysterious birth that was to come.
In what way does the juxtaposition of humble and proud set me up to understand what God is about in the Incarnation?

SERVANT / RULERS: The order of the world is about to be reversed with the coming of Jesus.
Have I been successful in this reversal? How?

GREAT THINGS / MIGHTY DEEDS: Scriptural history is full of stories of God's mighty deeds and great things.
What great things or mighty deeds have been parts of my life this past year? Did I see the hand of God in them?

MERCY / HELPED: When you reach out to help, you enter into the need of another. By giving this help you show mercy/steadfast love to the plight of the other.
How has God shown mercy to me this past year? What help I you need now?

FILLED / EMPTY: Yet another contrast. The people of God were empty of almost everything, especially hope. Now they are being filled in a most unusual way.
Have I ever been empty of hope and found God filling me in a most unusual way?

ABRAHAM / FATHERS / GENERATION: The genius of the Hebrew insight was that God was active in creation history and there was a plan for this history.
How does this insight of creation history having a goal make a difference? Do I experience my own creation history as having a goal? If so, what is it?

PARALLEL TEXTS: Lk. 1:42 // Jgs. 5:24; Jdt. 13:18; Lk. 1:46 // Is. 61:10; Lk. 1:47 // Hab. 3:18; Lk. 1:48 // Lk. 11:27; Ps. 113:7; I Sam. 1:11; Gn. 30:13; Ps. 138:6; Job. 5:12; Lk. 1:52 // Ps. 75:8; Ecclus. 10:14; Ezek. 21:31; Lk. 1:53 // Ps. 107:9; Lk. 1:54 // Ps. 98:3; Is. 41:8f; Lk. 1:55 // Mi. 7:20; 2 Sam. 22: 51; Gn. 13:15; 22:18; Lk. 1: 46-66 // 1 Sam. 2: 1-10;

OTHER TEXTS OF THE WEEK: Mi. 5:1-4; [Ps. 80: 2-3, 15-19](#); Heb. 10:5-10; Lk. 1: 39-45;
Revised Common Lectionary: Mi. 5:2-5; [Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26](#); Heb. 10: 5-10; Lk. 1: 39-55;

SUPPORTIVE INFORMATION:

It seems to be a very natural and almost innate behavior to celebrate the birthday of those we know and love. No one consults Emily Post or a book of social etiquette to make this decision. We are naturally moved to celebrate and welcome someone new into our world, and to continue annually remembering that day. The world is now changed and different because of this new member of our human family. The physical, biological, and cultural world have provided the "material" from which this new creature has sprung, but whose reality recreates the potential that allowed for the event and process of birth. [Fr. David Bock](#). Sermon on. 9/5/15

When God took on flesh in Jesus Christ, the uncreated and the created, the eternal and the temporal, the divine and the human became united. This unity meant that all that is mortal now points to the immortal, all that is finite now points to the infinite. In and through Jesus all creation has become like a splendid veil, through which the face of God is revealed to us. This is called the sacramental quality of the created order. All that is is sacred because all that is speaks of God's redeeming love. Seas and winds, mountains and trees, sun, moon, and stars, and all the animals and people have become sacred windows offering us glimpses of God. Henri Nouwen

Incarnational spirituality embraces all phenomena, seen and unseen, in the context of a unifying source which is at heart pure relational love. Dr. David Hirstius

When God gives of Godself, one of two things happens: either flesh is inspirited or spirit is enfleshed. It is really very clear. I am somewhat amazed that more have not recognized this simple pattern: God's will is incarnation. And against all our expectations of divinity, it appears that for God, matter really matters. This Creator of ours is patiently determined to put matter and spirit together, almost as if the one were not complete without the other. This Lord of life seems to desire a perfect but free unification between body and soul. So much so, in fact, that God appears to be willing to wait for the creatures to will and choose this unity themselves—or it remains unrealized. But if God did it any other way, the medium would not be the message: God never enforces or dominates, but only allures and seduces. Richard Rohr

Even science confirms that there is no clear division between matter and spirit. Everything is interpenetrating. As Franciscan scientist and theologian Ilia Delio often says, "We are in the universe and the universe is in us." Christ's very nature mirrors this universal reality, that we are all one, just as he is one within himself. Richard Rohr

What does God get out of sharing his life with us? Just the sheer joy of having his gift accepted and multiplied in a life which can no longer contain itself. [Fr. David Bock](#) 5/27/18

The decision to persevere prepares us for the answer to the Advent question: Why did it take the Incarnation to save us? It is because in order to persevere we needed both a reason and a model for this change. Fr. Jonah Wharff

That first century lacked not only a clear separation of church and state; it also lacked a clear separation of heaven and earth. Turn for a second from the end to the beginning of Jesus' life. Christianity said, according to Lk. 1: 26-38, that Jesus was born of Mary and the Holy Spirit, of a human mother and a divine Father. Paganism could not respond in rebuttal that such was quite impossible. Pagans knew, after all, of the birth of Aeneas from a divine mother and a human father. Closer to home, there was the claim that Augustus himself was conceived from a divine father and a human mother. Atia spent the night in Apollo's temple, the god visited her in the guise of a snake, and "in the tenth month after that Augustus was born and was therefore regarded as the son of Apollo," according to Suetonius's *The Lives of the Caesars: The Deified Augustus* 94:4 (Rolfe 1.267). Against such a background, the best paganism could offer to refute Luke was this, from Celsus's late-second-century *On the True Doctrine*: "Are we to think that the high God would have fallen in love with a woman of no breeding?" (Hoffmann 57-58). Not, it could not happen, but it could not happen to a peasant woman. In a world where gods and goddesses, spirits and immortals regularly interacted physically and sexually, spiritually and intellectually with human beings, the conception of a divine child and the vision of a dead person are neither totally abnormal nor completely unique events. Pgs. xviii-xix Crossan, John Dominic. *The Birth of Christianity*. NY. HarperSanFrancisco. 1998.

Along with accounts of the angel Gabriel visiting Zechariah and Mary, with the stories of birth and circumcision, we are treated to canticles by the different characters in the story. The canticles of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon, along with the song of the angels, all have their roots in passages of Old Testament poetry, which are not so much directly quoted as improvised. Mary's Magnificat recalls Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2; Zechariah's Benedictus reworks Malachi's promise of Elijah's return (Mai 4:5), and Simeon's Nunc Dimittis plays richly upon the passage about the "light to the nations" in Second Isaiah (Isa 49:6; 42:6; 60:3). Not only are these canticles evocative of known biblical passages, but they also preview themes for the coming narrative of Luke. In the narrative to follow Luke will call attention to three groups who interact with Jesus: the disciples, the crowd, and the opponents (Pharisees, scribes, lawyers, and rulers of the Jews).

Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). This canticle introduces the theme of the reversal of roles and values so central to Luke's presentation of Jesus's story. Unfolding in two parts, it praises the raising up of the lowly, as shown in his servant Mary (1:46-50), followed by the fulfillment of the promises to the servant Israel, with its equivalent lifting of the lowly, while the mighty are brought down from their thrones. The image of reversals reappears in instructions to the disciples. Pg.139. Beck, Robert. *Jesus and his Enemies*

Lk. 1.39–45: The visitation. 39: Judean, in southern Israel, where Jerusalem is located. 41: Filled with the Holy Spirit, 1.15n. 43: Lord (Gk “Kyrios”), here a divine title.

1.46–56: Mary’s Magnificat. The first of four canticles in Lk 1–2. The song is modeled on Hannah’s prayer (1 Sam 2.1–10; for similar songs by women see Ex 15.19–20 [Miriam]; Judg 5.1–31 [Deborah]; Jdt 16.1–17 [Judith]). 46: Magnifies, Lat “Magnificat.” 48: See 1 Sam 1.11[LXX]; Mary’s lowliness is the same Gk word (“tapeinōsis,” “low estate”) as Hannah’s “misery.” 49: Holy is his name, see 11.1n. 50: Generation to generation (Heb “dor [le]dor”), see Ex 17.16; Isa 34.10; Ps 79.13; T. Levi 18.8, and elsewhere. 54: His servant Israel, Isa 44.1; Ps 136.22; 1 Chr 16.13. 55: Promise he made, Gen. 12.3; 15.5; 17.7; 18.18; 22.17; Mic 7.20, and elsewhere. Combining covenants with David and Abraham, to this point, Luke emphasizes the promises to Israel first, and then, via Israel, to the nations. Pgs. 99-100. [The Jewish Annotated New Testament](#)

The fact that Christ was ‘born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary’, according to the Creed, implies that the event of the Incarnation took place in freedom on both the divine and the human side and that Christ’s unity with us was a unity in otherness. Pg. 37. Zizioulas, John D. *Communion and Otherness*. NY. T & T Clark. 2006

The Divine manifests itself to each soul in the form in which the soul is ontologically predisposed to comprehend it. Pg. 19. Laude, Patrick. *God is the Good*. Parabola. Summer 2008

Ein Sof (In Jewish mysticism it means the Boundlessness of ever present, even moving action) This process is continuously unfolding in a way that can be known in human consciousness only one way –as the arising experience of what we call “Now” with a capital N to differentiate it from the mundane use of the word “now” as a time-bound description. Pg. 12. Cooper, David A. *The Godding Process*. Parabola. Summer. 2008.

‘Have we ever thought of the meaning of the mystery of the Annunciation? When the time had come when God resolved to realize his incarnation before our eyes, he had first of all to raise up in the world a virtue capable of drawing him as far as ourselves. He needed a mother who would engender him in the human sphere. What did he do? He created the Virgin Mary, that is to say he called forth on earth a purity so great’ that, within this transparency, could concentrate himself to the point of appearing as a child.’ Pg. 114. Teilhard, Pierre de Chardin. *The Divine Milieu*. N.Y. Harper Torchbooks. 1957.

Blessed are you if you contemplate the Lord until you are radiant; the Lord will make his face shine in yours for the glory of all. Pg. 251 Olivera, Bernardo, O.C.S. O. *The Search for God: Conference, letters, and homilies*. Kalamazoo, MI. Cistercian Pub. 2002.

Those who have revealed truth engraved in the innermost depths of their hearts, do not depend on the sacred text and are for others living bibles. Pg. 128 Olivera, Bernardo, O.C.S. O. *The Search for God: Conference, letters, and homilies*. Kalamazoo, MI. Cistercian Pub. 2002.

“Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity, and love... We must learn to realize that the love of God seeks us in every situation, and seeks our good. His inscrutable love seeks our awakening...” Pages 14-17. Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*

She also said, "Just as it is impossible to be at the same moment both a plant and a seed, so it is impossible for us to be surrounded by worldly honor and at the same time to bear heavenly fruit." AMMA SYNCLERICA

"What needs to be guarded is the life of the Spirit within us. Especially we who want to witness to the presence of God's Spirit in the world need to tend the fire within with utmost care. . . Our first and foremost task is faithfully to care for the inward fire so that when it is really needed it can offer warmth and light to lost travelers." - Henri Nouwen [20th C.], "The Way of the Heart"

“The real function of discipline is not to provide us with maps, but to sharpen our own sense of direction so that, when we really get going, we can travel without maps.”

For the place of storytelling and the birth narrative see: Frederick Buechner in *The Hungering Dark*. NY. Seabury Press. 1981. Pages 51ff.

"Where God leads me in kindness I follow, follow lightly, and there are no footprints in the dust behind us."

The heart was made to admire. It admires attributes that another possesses and it lacks. This is how it affirms the good whether it possesses it or not. Its attention is always drawn to things greater than itself. When two or more hearts admire the same thing a bond develops. If one is arbitrarily excluded from that bond it can be confusing, not to mention painful. Everyone needs a community.
Fr. Jonah Wharff

"Either you look at the universe as a very poor creation out of which no one can make anything or you look at your own life and your own part in the universe as infinitely rich, full of inexhaustible interest, opening out into infinite further possibilities for study and contemplation and interest and praise. Beyond all and in all is God." Thomas Merton

When we begin to wonder, the door to the invisible begins to open and we sense a previously unperceived depth within ordinary reality. Pg. 67 Rolheiser, Fr. Ronald. *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God*. NY, Crossroad Pub. 2001.

When you touch one thing with deep awareness, you touch everything. Thich Nhat Hanh

The Eucharistic prayer is the great prayer of thanksgiving, around which lies the entire mystery of our salvation. It is much more than a tool to "bring God down onto the altar." Rather, it is more sublime, something akin to Mary's understanding of the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, but here coming on us all, bringing forth the mystery we call God: the sacred slipping into the profane and bearing God to humans. Plaiss, Mark. *This, Too Is My Body*. Commonweal. 5/19/06. Pg. 10

It's apparently God's wish that the truth unfold in us, and that's the great risk of the Incarnation. God has enough authority and power to wait for this to happen. Pg. 33 Richard Rohr. *Simplicity: the Art of Living*. NY. Crossroad. 1992.

"I'm not a theologian, but I learned about the theology of the incarnation. One of the beautiful things I read is that you cannot redeem what you will not assume. It says to me experience of God among us was God among the poorest of the poor — colonized, marginalized, suffering, oppressed people. If I want to redeem that, I have to be willing to assume that, to become one with that." - Alexie Torres-Fleming

To be born as a human being is a rare and precious gift. Our bodies are biodegradable vehicles for acquiring soul-growing experiences. As compostable conduits for channeling learning experiences, our bodies are the current expressions of a creative aliveness that, after nearly 14 billion years, enables the Universe to look back and reflect upon itself. While we have the gift of a body to anchor our experience, it is important to recognize our bio-cosmic nature. In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says, "Take heed of the Living One while you're alive, lest you die and seek to see Him and be unable to do so." An ancient Greek saying speaks even more directly, "Light your candle before night overtakes you." If the Universe were non-living at its foundations, it would take a miracle to save us from extinction at the time of death, and then to take us from here to a heaven (or promised land) of continuing aliveness. However, if the Universe is alive, then we are already nested and growing within its aliveness. When our physical body dies, the life-stream that we are makes its passage to a fitting home in the larger ecology of aliveness. We don't need a miracle to save us—we are already inside the miracle of sustaining aliveness. Instead of being saved from death, our job is to bring mindful attention to our ever-emerging aliveness in the here and now. [Duane Elgin](#)

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